

Rabbi Chaim Navon



## Being a No-Man

One of the greatest messages the Torah has brought to the world is that not everything that can be done is allowed, not everything that exists is good, and sometimes it's permitted to forbid. This is what the *Eitz HaDa'at*, the Tree of Knowledge, teaches us: having a shiny, good-looking, tasty fruit in front of me does not mean I'm allowed to eat it.

Even today, this lesson still contradicts the pagan intuitions of mankind. It opposes three common claims. First of all, the Torah refutes the idea that everything natural is good. This is an assumption that modern ecology worships. For example, look how the food giants assume that we too agree that natural = good, and so they add small bits of what was once fruit to their yogurts and sell it as natural food.

However, the Torah teaches us that – as in most things – good is not always natural, and natural is not always good.

The second claim the Torah refutes is that everything beautiful is good. The *Eitz HaDa'at* was a “delight to the eyes,” and yet it was prohibited to eat from it. In 1965, Israel's Minister of Education, Zalman Aran, banned the Beatles from performing in Israel, so as not to corrupt Israeli youth. Shulamit Aloni tried to overturn the evil decree, and asked Aran: “How can people who wrote the song ‘Yesterday’ be so corrupt?” Without relating specifically to the Beatles, she was wrong. Plenty of gifted artists are less than ideal human beings and, regretfully, there is no connection whatsoever between beauty and purity in this world.

And the third claim the Torah refutes is that everything new and

groundbreaking is good. The Torah illustrates this in Parshat Noach, when the advanced technology of *Migdal Bavel* casts disaster upon humanity. Technology can certainly be good. Chazal teach us that G-d gave Adam the gift of fire, which is the basis of our technology. Human beings are called upon to enhance the world through good technology and to avoid bad technology.

As Religious Zionists, we sometimes sneer at the Chareidim's attempts to curb what they see as harmful technology. They seem like King Cnut the Great, who was so proud he thought he could stop the ocean's tide, but drowned when the tide refused to be swayed by his decree. Technology is not a steadfast law of nature. It is a human choice. Even if we laugh at the Chareidim whose children snuck over to the neighbors to watch television, the average time a Chareidi child spends watching TV is at least 90 percent lower than his Religious Zionist. It is possible to discuss whether it was necessary to ban this technology, but it's incorrect to claim it's impossible.

Steve Jobs said that computers are like bicycles for the brain. The documentary “The Social Dilemma” claims that today's internet technology has completely disrupted this equation. As opposed to bicycles, the internet responds to you and actively tries to entice you to use it more and more. Sophisticated algorithms remember every action you ever made on the internet and bombard you with tailor-made messages every time you surf the web.

Because of the dominance of internet technology, it's impossible to reject it completely, as the Chareidim did with

television. But it is important to limit it, exactly for this reason. The computer and the internet are excellent servants if you control them, but they are cruel masters if they control you.

“The Social Dilemma” ends with a call for governments to intervene and restrict internet companies. This is a disappointing conclusion. It is not the government that eagerly turns on your iPhone in the morning. We are responsible for ourselves, and we are responsible for our children. Since our children don't need this sophisticated tool for vocational purposes, and since they have a lesser ability to resist its temptations, the first step is to push off their entry into the world of the internet. Their teachers too need to wean themselves off communicating with students via WhatsApp.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt showed that people in our generation who receive a smartphone in middle school are more likely to suffer from an extreme increase in depression and anxiety and a steep decline in healthy social relationships. Some smart people have asked me how I can forbid my child from having a smartphone when I use one myself? But we also have driving licenses and our children don't.

We love the Torah that tells us to say “yes” to good and to life, and we are grateful it teaches us to sometimes say “no.”

Rabbi Chaim Navon is a renowned author and educator.